Acts 17 and the Biblical Basis for Apologetics

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Despite its prominence historically, apologetics is seen as controversial in many Christian circles. Where practiced, contemporary apologetics is often characterised by a neglect of biblical foundations and models. This lecture seeks to identify, explore and apply such key biblical material. The focus will be on Acts 17:16-34 as a relevant case study.

1. Introduction

1.1 Defining apologetics

Every belief/worldview has its apologists. Christian apologetics may be described as *the rational justification of Christian truth claims over against specific questions, objections and alternatives, in order to establish 'the epistemic permission' and 'the epistemic obligation' of the Christian faith for both Christians and non-Christians*.

1.2 The need for biblical foundations and models

There is a widespread unease with apologetics in contemporary theology, despite its prominence historically as a theological discipline. Where practised, however, contemporary apologetics is often characterised by a neglect of biblical foundations and models. As evangelical apologetics, we need to respond to this need by a proper identification, exploration and application of key biblical material.

2. Identifying apologetic material in the Bible

The definition presented above is a helpful tool for the identification of apologetic material in the Bible.

2.1 … over against specific questions

The ministry of Jesus provides the key model, e.g. as expressed in the Gospel of John.

2.2 … over against specific objections

Both the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the apostles dealt with objections to the beliefs in one God and one Lord (1 Cor. 8:5-6). An informative example is Acts 26:24-29.

2.3 … over against specific alternatives

The OT prophets, Jesus and the apostles lived in pluralistic contexts of competing truth claims. The Book of Acts provides a number of examples of how the early church had to deal with significant alternative worldviews:

"Of three main types of Christian apologetic in the second century Luke provides first-century prototypes: apologetic in relation to pagan religion (Christianity is true; paganism is false); apologetic in relation to Judaism (Christianity represents the fulfillment of true

Judaism); apologetic in relation to the political authorities (Christianity is innocent of any offence against Roman law)." (F. F Bruce)

2.4 The Book of Acts as apologetics – with Acts 17:16-34 as a key model
The Book of Acts should be understood as apologetics, written for Christians with the dual intention to provide them *both* with confirmation of the truth of their Christian faith *and* with apologetic tools and models for reaching outsiders. This is a credible literary context for considering Acts 17:16-34 as an apologetic model.

3. <u>Exploring Acts 17:16-34 as a case study of biblical apologetics</u>.

3.1 The principles
When exploring a biblical passage which is related to apologetics at least three questions need to be asked:

1. <u>What kind of text?</u>
Is it an Old Testament or a New Testament passage? Is it a narrative, didactive or poetic text?

2. <u>What kind of context?</u>
Which questions, objections and/or alternatives do we find in the text? Are there any comparable contexts (i.e. from *then* to *now*)?

3. <u>What kind of content?</u>
Is the Christian response in the text to be considered in terms of : a) normative worldview content? b) a recommendable approach? c) a positive, repeatable pattern? – or d) possibly a negative model?

3.2 Acts 17:16-34 as a case study
This wellknown Lucan passage has a number of significant apologetic features:

1. Luke describes Paul as an apologist steeped in <u>a genuinely Judeo-Christian worldview</u> in the midst of the challenging pluralistic and pagan context of Athens. (*See also*: Daniel 1, 1 Cor. 2:1-5, 1 Cor 8:6.)

2. Luke describes Paul's conscious <u>apologetic approach</u> in Athens:
(*See also*: Acts 17:1ff, Acts 18:1ff, 1 Cor. 9:19-23.)
 <u>a</u>. Luke probably describes Paul as an apologist who gradually sees the need for a *proactive approach* in agora contexts.

 <u>b</u>. Luke implicitly describes Paul as a Christian apologist with a *contextual understanding* of relevant questions, objections and alternatives in Athens to his claims about 'Jesus and the Resurrection'.

<u>c</u>. Luke describes Paul as an apologist with an awareness of and an ability to apply *appropriate justification procedures* in various contexts, relative to whether people have any knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and/or belief in the Old Testament Scriptures as authoritative.

<u>d</u>. Luke describes Paul before the Areopagus as a 'proactive' Christian apologist who starts with the beliefs of the Athenians and *'positively deconstructs'* these beliefs.

3. Luke describes Paul as a Christian apologist with <u>an overall apologetic argument</u> before the Areopagus Council, where he moves <u>from</u> arguments about the credibility of a Judeo-Christian natural theology <u>through</u> the plausibility and implications of God's ultimate authority <u>to</u> the significance and evidence of the Resurrection:

<u>a</u>. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with the argument that, whereas natural theologies such as Stoicism and Epicureanism contain elements of truth, a Judeo-Christian *natural theology* provides the most adequate view of God, the universe and humanity.
(*See also*: Gen. 1, Ps. 19:1-6, Is. 40-44, Jer. 23:23-24, Acts 10:34-35, Acts 14:8-18, Rom. 1:18-23.)

<u>b</u>. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with the argument that the claim that the Judeo-Christian God has *ultimate authority* – as expressed in the claims about his final judgment – <u>1</u>) is plausible, since he is the Creator and Sustainer, and <u>2</u>) constitutes an appropriate basis for claims about 'the epistemic obligation' of the Christian faith.
(*See also:* Gen. 3, Acts 14:15, 1 Thess. 1: 9-10.)

<u>c</u>. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with an argument about the historical *Resurrection* of Jesus – <u>1</u>) as resonating with ultimate human concerns, <u>2</u>) as indicating the uniqueness and authority of Jesus, and <u>3</u>) as being based on sufficient, available evidence.
(*See also:* John 20:30-31, Acts 2:36, Rom. 1:4, 1 Cor. 15, 1 Pet. 1:3.)

4. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with <u>a threefold apologetic aim</u>: to interest, to persuade and to confront.
(*See also*: John 4, Acts 18:1ff, 2 Cor. 4:1-6, 2 Cor 5:11, Dan. 5.)

4. Applying biblical material – as illustrated from Acts 17:16-34

A number of Christian theologians and apologists claim that philosophical and popular *postmodernism* – with scepticism, relativism and hedonism as key components – constitutes a major contemporary 'worldview challenge' to Christian truth claims. If so, the relevance of the Acts 17 model needs to be assessed in the light of this influential challenge. Such an assessment would lead to the following conclusions (see also Dahle 2002b):

The truth claims in the Acts 17 model remain valid and relevant also in the contemporary context as the defining *content* of a Christian worldview. The *general emphases* in Acts 17 regarding contextual understanding, application of appropriate justification procedures and 'positive deconstruction' of alternative worldviews seem valid and relevant in any context. The common contextual features of biblical illiteracy and pluralism point to the relevance of Paul's specific apologetic *approach* to the contemporary postmodern challenge. Paul's *arguments* may be seen as potentially relevant, but need to be further developed contextually, if they are to be seen as properly valid over against philosophical and popular postmodernism (see below on one of the arguments). Paul's *aims* seem relevant and valid in a postmodern context, if properly applied and when seen as complementary.

The contemporary relevance of Paul's apologetics in Athens can be illustrated with reference to his '*Resurrection argument*':

> 1. The claim that the Resurrection *resonates with ultimate human concerns* need to be justified in the context of ambiguous post-modern attitudes to life, where anxiety, longing and restlessness seem to exist alongside cynicism, irony and 'nihilism with a smile' (Wim Rietkerk). This means that a 'positive deconstruction' of the latter views needs to be developed, where the application of an argumentative strategy of 'relativizing the relativizers' seems appropriate: "By this is meant applying to sceptics the scepticism they apply to others, thus pushing them out toward the negative consequences of their own beliefs." (Os Guinness) If so, the absurdity and despair of postmodernism becomes apparent. This may lead to an increased appreciation of the adequacy of the 'Resurrection hope' for humanity in a post-modern context of fading or lost hopes.

> 2. The claim that 'the Resurrection argument' *indicates the uniqueness and authority of Jesus* needs to be justified in the context of a widespread, continuous interest in Jesus as a figure of identification and legitimation for a number of worldviews. In view of post-modern explorations of various perspectives, the Christian 'story' of Jesus (as found in the New Testament Gospels) must be shown as coherent and attractive over against such competing 'Jesus-stories'. This may lead to that the evidential basis for the various 'stories' increasingly is seen as a key issue, over against popular post-modern claims about the irrelevance of history.

> 3. The claim that 'the Resurrection argument' *is based on sufficient, available evidence* needs to be justified over against the historical relativism (i.e. the non-realism and the non-objectivism) of philosophical postmodernism. If the general

credibility of historical knowledge is established over against this view, then the specific case for the historicity of the Resurrection may be argued. Even though 'the Resurrection argument' seems preferable in a context of competing theistic truth claims, it may even present a challenge to philosophical postmodernism when argued on the basis of a 'minimal facts approach'. (This approach implies using as historically established evidence only those reported facts in the Gospels that are accepted by a majority of contemporary critical scholars.) Thus understood, 'the Resurrection argument' would have a vital role in establishing the credibility of the Christian worldview in a post-modern context.

These tentative applications of Paul's *'Resurrection argument'* indicate that the content, the approach, the arguments, and the aims of the apologetic model in Acts 17:16-34 may justifiably be seen as valid and relevant for contemporary apologetics in comparable *'agora* contexts', at least in relation to the postmodern challenge.

Some definitions:

Positive deconstruction:
Positive deconstruction is the critical analysis of a given worldview on the basis of three standard criteria of truth: 1) consistency and coherence, 2) correspondence with reality (or the known facts), and 3) pragmatic relevance or adequacy. This deconstruction has the positive aim of helping people to discover truth and error in their underlying beliefs and thus prepare the way for a proclamation and defence of the truth of the Gospel. (Nick Pollard)

Natural theology:
"General revelation is the traits of the author reflected in his product, the fingerprint of the potter in the clay, so to speak, whereas the arguments of natural theology are the human products of men's rational reflection upon general revelation." (William Lane Craig)

Popular postmodernism:
"Postmodernism moves beyond the 'modern', scientifically based view of the world by blending a *scepticism* about technology, objectivity, absolutes, and total explanations with a *stress* on image and appearance, personal interpretation, pleasure and the exploration of every spiritual and material perspective." (E. David Cook)

Philosophical postmodernism:
"1. The first question postmodernism addresses, is not what is there or how we know what is there but how language functions to construct meaning itself. In other words, there has been a shift in 'first things' from being to knowing to constructing meaning… 2. The truth about the reality itself is forever hidden from us. All we can do is tell stories… 3. All narratives mask a play for power. Any one narrative used as a metanarrative is oppressive… 4. Human beings make themselves who they are by the languages they construct about themselves… 5. Ethics, like knowledge, is a linguistic construct. Social good is whatever society takes it to be… 6. The cutting edge of culture is literary theory…" (James W. Sire)

Suggestions for further reading:

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